# 2. Masked and Camouflaged: Thwarting Off Facial Recognition Algorithms, or The Possibility of Self

But, of course […]

we do not “own” the facts of our lives at all.

This ownership passes out of our hands at birth,

at the moment we are first observed.

– Janet Malcolm

## Introduction

An “anti-facial recognition movement is on the rise,” writes Joseph Cox for *The Kernel* (Cox 2014). It is perhaps premature to speak of a "movement", but indeed a number of artists have expressed anxiety about the alleged ubiquitous implementation and dissemination of facial and identity recognition technologies. In particular, masks and camouflage wear have emerged as a response to facial recognition technology. They are exhibited in international art shows, both as art and design projects and as a socio-technical commentary. Some masks and camouflage wear are also commercially available as gear that provides access to potentially subversive modalities of being public; they are sold with the promise that they undercut or confuse facial recognition algorithms online and offline. In the following,[[1]](#footnote-1) I explore the concept of algorithmic anxiety through artistic mask and camouflage design.

Masks and stealth wear are popular attempts to avoid algorithmic anxiety created by facial recognition systems. Masks, umbrellas, goggles, veils, and balaclavas are common occurrences in exhibitions on algorithmic culture. Within this imaginary, artists adopt a language and strategies of field exploration and couple individual rights claims with guerrilla and "reconquistador" approaches. In this chapter, I will focus on the ways in which the artists Zach Blas, Adam Harvey, and Sterling Crispin critique forms of algorithmic governance manifested by facial recognition technologies. The work of these three artists has been widely exhibited in museums, galleries, art institutions, and at festivals and conferences in Europe, the U.S., and the U.K. and each of these projects have garnered a fair deal of media attention in the international press and by magazines and blogs that discuss digital media culture. Each of these projects is specifically aimed at facial recognition technology—which differs from other mask projects, which tend to engage with online and offline anonymity, with privacy in relation to political activism, and/or with data-mining in general.[[2]](#footnote-2) More often than not, the work of these artists is framed as an artistic response to surveillance—or, as counter-surveillance strategies.

As Alexander Galloway puts it:

We are witnessing a rise in the politicisation of absence- and presence-oriented themes such as invisibility, opacity, and anonymity, or the relationship between identification and legibility, or the tactics of nonexistence and disappearance (Galloway, 2008, p. 224).

Galloway calls this politicisation of absence the "black-boxing of the self" (Galloway, 2008, p. 224). In this chapter, however, mask and camouflage projects are explored as different responses to algorithmic anxiety, exploring the future self in relation to the dissemination of the algorithmic facial recognition systems which have become characteristic of algorithmic culture. Why take the route of concealment strategies? What imperatives shape and underpin these designs? What forms of relating to facial recognition technology does this approach privilege? Algorithmic anxiety in relation to facial recognition technologies revolves around the position of the self in algorithmic culture and around the face as understood as an index of humanity. Masks and camouflage art practices question the affordances of algorithmic governance by way of facial recognition technologies, focusing on a self who is immersed in a regime of visibility that itself remains mostly invisible. Questions concerning the understanding of the self in relation this regime of visibility will be the focus of this analysis. I propose that a relational assessment of the concepts of masks and camouflage wear allows for a better understanding of the algorithmic anxieties around facial recognition systems.

## Capturing the Face Anxiety

Ever since the portrait photography of Ellis Island immigrants by Dorothea Lang, Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein and Gordon Parks, the face has undeniably become a political landscape in the arts. In a way, the mask and camouflage projects that form the subject of this chapter constitute a reversal of the classic artistic tradition of portraiture and of the latest craze in the selfie culture. It also twists what Mark B.N. Hansen dubbed the “digital-facial-image” (DFI), with which he described a trend in contemporary art that focused on the digitally generated face. Leaning on the work of Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze and their concepts of faciality and the face machine, Hansen proposed his notion of DFI as “a new paradigm” in contemporary art (Hansen, 2003, p. 205). These days, it seems, artists and designers are more focused on attempts to derail the technologies that aim to capture the face by hiding faces, covering them up, or rendering them unrecognisable to facial recognition technology. Artists use low-tech, no-tech and various forms of technological engineering in developing face masks and camouflage wear both as forms of critique and as responses to the possible effects facial recognition technologies may have on people and society when operated by the state or by tech giants. What these different art projects show is not just that the technology that underpins facial recognition algorithms is fallible. The different machinations of faciality outlined below—as a singular, unique, personal and identifiable security-check, as the imposition of a political norm, as collective empowerment, as a plural, multiform, malleable and amendable canvas, as a means to play with identity, similarity and difference, and as a source of data extraction—indicate that supra-individual cultural narratives and concerns about policing and governance are braided around the algorithmic capture of the face.

Examples are numerous. The artist and designer Mark Shepherd (2010) developed *the Sentient City Survival Kit.* The artefacts of this kit include a CCD-Me-Not umbrella equipped with LED lights that defuses recognition technology used in CCTV cameras. Two years later, in 2012, researchers at the National Institute of Informatics in Tokyo presented what they named privacy goggles. The glasses are fitted out with infrared light sources that, when on, confuse CCTV cameras equipped with facial recognition software—reportedly without impairing your vision. Inspired by these privacy goggles, the artist Ewa Novak designed what she describes as face jewellery, which won her the Mazda Design Award in Łódź in 2019 (Studarus 2017). This jewellery is made of brass and looks like topsy-turvy glasses with brass ovals that hang below the eyes. In 2016, researchers from Carnegie Mellon University presented a pattern for spectacle frames meant to throw state-of-the-art facial recognition software off-trail.

Low-tech camouflage gadgets have been taken up too, with the specific aim of preventing face detection on the streets and online. With *PIXELHEAD* (2012), the German artist Martin Backes designed a balaclava in camouflage style. It “acts as media camouflage” and is meant to offer "anonymity in the Internet era" by making facial recognition impossible (Backes 2012). On his website, Backes notes that he is worried about the social consequences of facial recognition technology and, in particular, that anonymity will lose its meaning on the internet (Backes 2012). *Realface Glamouflag*e (2013) is a collection of T-shirts designed by Simone C. Niquille. The pattern on the shirts is composed of a collage of celebrity impersonators and pirated portraits used for fake social media accounts which reportedly confuse facial recognition technology. Adam Harvey’s *CV Dazzle* (2012) uses camouflage makeup to obstruct face-detection technology. The term "dazzle" refers to a painting technique that was used on warships during World War I. The stripes and bold colours of this technique were designed to disrupt the outline of a ship. Dazzling made it difficult for an enemy ship to detect a ship's size, range, and direction at sea. Inspired by this technique, Harvey's *CV Dazzle* makeup design disrupts detection by facial recognition algorithms by dazzling facial features. The project is part of his larger project, *The Privacy Gift Shop* (2012), an e-commerce platform for counter-surveillance gadgets mainly aimed at subverting national security technology and meant to “minimise or degrade the useful information received by the observer” (Harvey, 2018, p. 130). He explains in an interview with the BBC that what motivated this work is that he feels that somebody is watching him in his day to day activities, “that you always have a chaperone,” someone who looks over your shoulder (Harvey 2014). His project was featured in *The New York Times* (Harvey, 2013) and his dazzling makeup was applied to visitors of TransCyberian, Parisian hacker-run noise parties that would also teach visitors about online security (Doringer & Flederer, 2018, p. 12). A comparable anti-facial recognition makeup design was launched in 2017 by Grigory Bakunov, director of technology distribution at Yandex, a Russian tech giant.

In recent years, a variety of face masks have entered the exhibition space of museums. An often-exhibited anti-facial recognition mask is Zach Blas’s *Face Cages* (2013-2016). In this work, Blas fabricated face masks that resemble iron muzzles based on the shape of biometric diagrams, evoking resonances with prison bars, the Scold’s Bridle, and torture devices used during slavery in the U.S. and in the Medieval period in Europe. His *Face Cages* have been on display throughout Europe, for example in the two-part exhibition in Vienna and Amsterdam titled *FACELESS*—which also showed work of Adam Harvey. *FACELESS* focused on hidden faces in contemporary art since 9/11 and thematised issues such as “privacy, the burka, data-collection, terrorism, etc.” (Doringer & Felderer, 2018, p. 8). Furthermore, the past decade witnessed protest movements whose signature is a face mask used both to avoid face detection technology and as a way to express collective belonging and togetherness. Prominent examples include the Guy Fawkes masks used by Anonymous and worn during public protests by the Occupy Wall Street movement; the colourful knitted balaclavas of the Russian punk protest group Pussy Riot; and the black balaclavas of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation.

That the face, masks and camouflage figure so prominently in exhibitions is likely because these projects illuminate the ways algorithmic technologies (re)configure identity and subjectivity. The face plays a central role in human interaction (Napier 1986; Ingold 2000). For this reason, communicative interaction in physical presence is often described as talking “face-to-face”—a concept extended by platforms such as Skype and FaceTime. Interaction, as Erving Goffman has famously said, is always also about avoiding being “in wrong face” or “being out of face,” and about “saving face.” What he calls maintenance of face is a condition of human interaction, and what he terms face work—namely “the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face”—is a key part of any interaction (Goffman, 1967, p. 12). Goffman thus uses “face” in a relational sense, defining it as ‘the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes’ (1967, p. 5).

Because of this centrality of the face in interaction, it is at the same time an ambiguous phenomenon: it is both a screen that permits an assumed internal state to be seen and a cloak that conceals, as when secrets are hidden behind a straight face (Goffman, 1974, p. 216).[[3]](#footnote-3)

## The Self Entangled with Algorithms

The face is also vital in Kierkegaard's relational conception of the self. Kierkegaard's understanding of the face in relation to his notion of the self as a relational synthesis helps to better understand the constituents of the anxieties evoked by face recognition technology. In *CA,* he explains that in the experience of anxiety one becomes aware that one exists in relation: to our body, to our surroundings, our family, our past and future, the nation we inhabit, its culture, and the entire history of humankind (CA, 2014, p. 68). The self is a synthesis, Kierkegaard writes, and this synthesis is a relation (CA, 2014, p. 88). In *SUD*, Kierkegaard explains that the self as a relational synthesis is composed of contrasting elements: temporality and eternity, freedom and necessity and infinitude and finitude (SUD, p. 30). The task is to think these contrasting elements together, to actualise them together, in a never-ending process of becoming.

Importantly, what such a relational understanding implies is that the self is not autonomous. Kierkegaard writes:

the self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself to and in relating itself to itself… The human self is such derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating to itself it relates to another. (SUD, p. 13-14)

Again and again, Kierkegaard stresses the importance of the self’s relation to itself, to its limitations and possibilities. As we are relational beings, we are not wholly transparent to ourselves, nor to others, neither are others to us. We always stand in relation to something “other.” In *E/O* he describes this ‘something’ as follows:

When you look long and attentively at a face, you sometimes discover that it is as if there were another face within the one you see. This is in general an unmistakable sign that the soul conceals an emigrant who has withdrawn from the outside world to watch over a hidden treasure, and the direction observation must take is intimated by the way one face lies as though inside the other… (E/O p. 469)

The face assumes here "an ambiguity" (E/O, p. 469). According to Kierkegaard, situations that evoke anxiety are undetermined, vague, and ambiguous. Thus this "otherness within," this "hidden secret" to which we stand in relation and of which we have no knowledge, can condition anxiety. The question, for Kierkegaard, is how one relates to such ambiguities; that is, the question is how do we relate to being, in part, a stranger to ourselves. Algorithmic anxiety is more than an experience of uncertainty and a lack of control in the face of algorithms (as in Jhaver et al. 2018). It seems instead a more existential anxiety that pertains to the inability to fully understand or know the self. Algorithmic anxiety flares up when conceptions of subjectivity are perceived to be challenged by the capture of the face by facial recognition algorithms. This challenge, it seems, is posed by the access facial recognition systems are assumed to have to one's "hidden treasure." Which is to say, it is anxiety concerning the relations to whom and what subjects constitute themselves. It concerns who participate and to what extent in crafting observations, relations, and accounts of the self, and at what consequences, in terms of the affordances of technologies and the possibilities of subjectivity it might bring about.

## Algorithmic Anxiety: Anti-Facial Recognition Masks & Camouflage

Recognition algorithms are imagined to ‘do’ something with the ‘self.’ The question is *what* they are presumed to do and *how* they are imagined to do so. Three prominent and often-exhibited artistic portrayals of facial recognition algorithms provide a point of entry into the different ways the relation to facial recognition algorithms and the anxieties surrounding the possibilities of what these algorithms might do and what might become of the self are imagined. What is at stake is an ambiguous relationof the selfin relation to itself and to facial recognition systems.

Artist and scholar Zach Blas’s series of mask projects are designed to visualise how identity recognition technology analyses human faces whilst also resisting identity recognition technology by offering an undetectable face masks. His *Facial Weaponisation Suite* (2012-2014) comprises a series of amorphous collective masks designed and produced during community workshops by at LGBTI+ and minority groups. They are a form of resistance against facial recognition technologies and the inequalities these technologies normalise. These masks, by virtue of their shape and cryptographic material, will not be recognised as a face by identity recognition software. Identity recognition technology, as Blas sees it, "control[s] through an optical logic of making visible" to "police and criminalise populations all over the world" (Blas 2014). These technologies, he argues, produce standards "to account for human life" (Blas, 2016, p. 45). Data-mining algorithms require normalising techniques for indexing human activity and identity, which then operate as standard templates for regulation, management, and governance (Blas, 2016, p. 45). Models that account for what is "normal" and what defies "the normal." His masks represent a resistance to what he calls "informatic visibility", which he argues is reducing us to mere "aggregates of data" (Blas 2014). Informatic standardisations, in turn, produce a conception of the human "as that which is fully measurable, quantifiable, and knowable—that is, informatically visible—an enterprise that undoubtedly accelerates a neoliberal agenda" (Blas, 2016, p. 45). One mask in his suite, *Fag Face Mask* responds to scientific studies that claim to be able to determine sexual orientation on the basis of facial recognition technologies (Blas 2014). Blas is worried about the development and implementation of facial recognition systems will exacerbate social inequalities, affecting minority groups in society in particular.

[insert image: CH2\_1 caption: An example of a face mask created by artist Zach Blas ]

Technologist and artist Adam Harvey has a different approach. With *HyperFace* (2017), he designed camouflage couture which aims to confuse facial recognition systems. His couture does so by presenting these systems with countless false positives. *HyperFace* is a textile print that identity recognition technology detects as a face. The patterns are based on ideal-type models of algorithmic representations of a human face. *HyperFace*, he explains, is “a new kind of camouflage that aims to reduce the confidence score of facial detection and recognition by providing false faces that distract computer vision algorithms” (Harvey 2017). He continues: ‘[It] aims to alter the surrounding area… [and] offers a higher confidence score for a false face by exploiting a default in specific algorithmic systems for the highest confidence score’ (Harvey 2017).

*HyperFace* reduces the confidence score of the real face by redirecting more attention to the nearby false face regions. Harvey states that his projects are motivated by concerns about how computer vision will be used “to extract knowledge without the cooperation or consent of an individual” (Samuels 2017) and that facial recognition technology specifically ‘poses a significant threat to privacy and liberty, but their vulnerabilities and imperfections also present a largely unexplored array of opportunities to reimagine appearance in the age of computer vision’ (Harvey, 2018, p.135).

[insert image: CH2\_2 caption: An example of a Hyperface pattern, created by artist Adam Harvey ]

The artist and technologist Sterling Crispin is concerned about the future effects recognition technology may have on humanity as a whole. He states: “I am concerned with the aggressive overdevelopment of surveillance technology and how this is changing human identity and how human identity interacts with technology” (quoted in Doringer, 2018, p. 83). His *Data-Masks* (2013-2015) are 3-D printed face masks that visualise what robust, model-based recognition and detection algorithms recognise and detect as a face—or what passes as a face. They have been produced by reverse engineering facial recognition and detection algorithms. In his own words, “they show the machine what it’s looking for”; they hold up a mirror to the machine (Crispin 2014). His *Data-Masks* are meant to make visible aspects of what Crispin understands as invisible power structures: ‘*Data-masks* are animistic deities, brought out of the algorithmic spirit-world of the machine and into our material world, ready to tell us their secrets or warn us of what's to come’ (Crispin 2013). Crispin writes about how we are "always already being seen, watched and analysed" by what he calls a "Technological Other, a global living super-organism" that is "peering into our bodies" (Crispin 2014).

[insert image: CH2\_3 caption: An example of a Data-Mask created by artist Sterling Crispin]

For Blas, facial recognition propagates standardisation of behaviour and appearance, which he worries might single out minority and worsen the position of minority groups in society. Harvey is concerned mostly by the unknown ends to which recognition systems might be used in the near future and how this might impinge on hard-won liberties. And Crispin is anxious about the possible “Frankenstein-effect” he sees facial recognition systems to be a part of. The implications of facial recognition technology are by the account of the artists understood in relation to possible "ends" of privacy, liberty, and humanity. Facial recognition technology is given significance in relation to these supposed ends. It is these ends that give meaning to these technologies as a means in the present. Thinking in terms of ends provides orientation and direction, like a map: "We are here now, we came from there, and this is where we are going". This urge to locate, to position yourself in relation to a trajectory while simultaneously placing yourself outside of it or hovering above it, as if perusing a map, can be understood as the desire to look into the future to know what lies ahead and see where things are going to, perhaps in an attempt to deflect anxiety about the future. These masks and camouflage projects can also be used to re-think the self as a relational synthesis. These artworks bring the relationally of the self to the fore, and function as mediation in the relations between the self, the face, data algorithmically extracted from facial image and more abstract notions and preoccupations about the future of algorithmic culture for humankind.

## Camouflage and the Face Mask: Concepts of Relational Entanglement

Anxiety about the future disposition of the self and humanity in relation to facial recognition technology is assuaged by becoming unrecognisable and by concealment, in becoming undetectable and unidentifiable to identity recognition technology by way of masking and camouflage. Blas, Harvey, and Crispin maintain that one can undermine being captured by recognition technology by becoming unrecognisable to it. This raises the question of what concept of relationality and entanglement is operative in the deployment of masks and camouflage by the artists discussed here. To answer that, it's necessary first to explore how camouflage and masks have historically been one of the primary media through which subjectivities have been cultivated.

Harvey's *Hyper-Face* plays with the concept of guerrilla-style camouflage. Camouflage is here not a form of invisibility; it is first and foremost a way of unrecognisability. Tactics of disappearing from algorithmic vision are mobilised as a countermeasure to the anxiety facial recognition algorithms induce. In *Hide and Seek: Camouflage, Photography, and the Media of Reconnaissance*, Hannah Rose Shell argues that camouflage is a way of "not showing up," to appear to disappear, to recede into the background, to become invisible (Shell, 2012, p. 10). The objective is to minimise the difference between figure and ground, object and environment. Camouflage involves both revealing and concealing (Leach, 2006, p. 244). It is thus a tactic of invisibility through visibility. This play between the visible and the invisible in camouflage displays its entanglement with both art and warfare, as both share the desire to explore the limits of vision and, importantly, the entanglement of a subject with its socio-technical environment. Shell recounts how different historical forms of camouflage were developed in tandem with artists, using different media from painting to film (Shell 2012). What all forms of camouflage have in common is the shared concern with the blurring of boundaries between self and environment. Likewise, contemporary army uniforms are camouflaged as to be "disruptive":

Their […] purpose is to make it difficult for the eye to discern the edges and contours of the wearer's form. They are designed not to look like bark, grass and leaves which is the paradigm of the old camouflage, but rather to dissolve into formless dapples of detritus, light and shadow (Swedberg 2007, p72).

Thus, both in traditional forms of camouflage and in the contemporary artistic camouflage forms described here, camouflage is aimed at blurring boundaries: the point of giving off bark and leaves was always to blur the boundary between self and environment, to escape from vision by an adversary or some medium of capture. Camouflage is as much a concept of entanglement as it is of concealment.

This, too, follows Roger Caillois's classic description of camouflage. Writing about mimicry and legendary psychasthenia, Caillois discussed camouflage as the loss of boundaries of the self in terms of natural phenomena of concealment, noting, in particular, a form of "depersonalisation" by assimilation to space (Caillois 1984). Camouflage always concerns a desire to escape from vision by something or someone, and a play with relations between self, environment and a medium of perception. At the same time, as Hannah Rose Shell notes, camouflage is "a form of cultivated subjectivity" (Shell, 2012, p. 19). Seen in this light, Harvey's *Hyper-Face* depersonalises the face while it simultaneously cultivates subjectivity.

Face masks too have historically been among the primary media through which subjectivities have been cultivated. In fact, the concept of person comes from the Latin *persona*, denoting a theatrical mask. Less well known is that *persona* is a more complex concept altogether. It signifies *movement* and sound, a sounding through the face, literally a form of *per sonare*. The theatrical concept of the *persona* stands for both the mask and for the part played, but also for the face. Masks gain their connotations of ingenuity and antithetical to true, interior identities from later medieval, interpretations (Napier, 1986, p. 6-9). These connotations can still be found in the English language in expressions like "to show your true face", "put on a brave face", and in the verb "unmask". In Greek physical theatre, for example, masks symbolised a particular character, as masks transfix facial expressions, they divert attention from the face to the body, to its composure, how it moves around in space. In physical theatre, where the emphasis is laid on the embodiment of the narrative and on imagining narrative spaces through the body, the expressive face is seen as a possible distraction and obstacle to that end.

Japanese conceptions of masks, known for instance in *No* and *Kabuki* plays, have been discussed as much more complicated than simply the concealment of an interior self. Sakabe Megumi has for instance noted that in Yamato Japanese, the word for mask and for face was one and the same: *omote*. And, he argues, the related notion of *omo-zashi* (the features of the face) makes clear that this conception of the face is always already relational as it involves both that which is seen by the other and that which sees itself. According to Megumi, ‘*omote* is evidently the structure of the mask… but at the same time it is also the structure of the face. The reason is that the face also is what is seen by the other, what sees itself, and what sees itself as an other’ (Megumi, 1999, p. 245).

Crucially, *omote* refers to the structure of a surface, but a surface without an original. Its relationality pertains not to hypostatized "personal" selves, but to a surface play of reflections. Discussing animal masks among Inuit and Yup'ik people of Alaska, Tim Ingold notes that "there is no face peering out from behind the mask. In effect, the identity of the human mask-bearer is not so much disguised as displaced by the mask he carries" (Ingold, 2000, p. 124). Here a synthesis comes into view: the self-as-other. This self-as-other becomes literal and concrete in Crispin's *Data-Masks* and Blas's *Facial Weaponization Suite*, as both their series of masks have been modelled from aggregated facial data. The pink amorphous blob of his *Facial Weaponisation* series, for instance, has been generated from the data of the faces of participants that attended the community workshops that Blas organised and who self-identified as gay; the black masks by the aggregated data of participants who self-identified as black. This presenting of the self-as-other(s) is here a tactic of unrecognisability. It raises the question: To what power do they desire to become unrecognisable?

## Black Boxing the Self

Kathryn Schulz writes: "[T]he dream of invisibility is not about attaining power but escaping it" (Schulz 2015). According to the campaigns of many social movements of the past sixty years, visibility—in the form of recognition of identity—is a precondition for emancipation and thus representation and power. For these artists, however, invisibility is less of a condition to be overcome—of disempowerment—and more a precondition of the possibility of empowerment. Where identity and recognition politics are traditionally about becoming recognised and visible—as visibility and recognition is the privilege of the white male and dominant class—here, unrecognisability is regarded as politically empowering. Obviously, the shapes and patterns that subvert algorithmic detection through masks and textile are hyper-visible, making you stand out in a crowd. It then seems ironic that these hyper-visible camouflage projects are designed by white, Western, tech-savvy, educated men: an already highly recognised and visible identity. Within these artworks, however, being visible and recognisable has to do with automated administration with technological detection, with being monitored, pinpointed, and identified in the interest of others. This time it is a strategy of personal control, an attempt to opt-out of a so-conceived regime of visibility. From what do these artists imagine to hide?

Algorithmic culture is associated with a police state, with classism and racism, with a dehumanising organism, and with being catalogued like a proprietary object. What evokes anxiety is the possibility of powerlessness, the possibility of being exposed, identified and characterised, being surpassed and overpowered by a Technological Other, being discriminated against and judged on the basis of numbers according to set standards. Whether it is capitalism, asymmetric power relations, or technological rationality, all three artists are anxious about possible future scenarios of algorithmic identity recognition technology and the disposition of the self therein and all three are interested in creating "spaces" of invisibility, opacity, or unrecognisability. With his *Facial Weaponisation* masks, Blasaims to avoid becoming visible to recognition technology, which he associates with the control and policing of in particular minority groups. This controlling and policing, he suggests, happens by way of data aggregation via recognition technology. Harvey's *HyperFace* garment aims to prevent the extraction of knowledge by means of recognition technology, which he associates with a threat to privacy. And Crispin's *Data-Masks* aim to visualise machine vision, a vision he associates with being "seen through" by a Technological Other. According to Crispin, "we live under the shadow of a totalitarian police state…" (Crispin 2014). He claims we are "witnessing the rise of a Globally Networked Technological Organism" that will "exceed the human mind," and that the "human is lost in all this" (Crispin 2014). For Harvey, the problem is the "imbalance of power between the surveillant and the surveilled [sic]" (Harvey 2013). It is the "ubiquitous and unregulated profiling and cataloguing aspect" of these identification technologies that he considers a threat to privacy (Harvey 2013). Blas fears that "the global standards" recognition technology relies on "return us to the classist, racist, sexist scientific endeavours of the nineteenth century" and lead toward "Total Quantification", annihilating "alterity" (Blas 2014).

What do these zones of unrecognisability provide that otherwise is lost to facial recognition systems? Harvey's camouflage projects claim to provide "more control over your privacy" by "protecting your data" (Harvey 2013). Crispin caters to the supposed needs of protestors. His *Data-Masks* are "intended for use in acts of protest and civil disobedience" (Crispin 2014). They are themselves "an act of political protest" by means of "giving form to an otherwise invisible network of control" (Crispin 2014). Blas sees his masks as a tool in the tradition of collective protest movements like Anonymous, the Zapatistas and Pussy Riot: "[f]acelessness and becoming imperceptible are serious threats to the state and capitalism," Blas claims in a video Communiqué (Blas quoted in Cox 2014). He calls for "radical exits that open pathways to self-determination and autonomy" (Blas 2016, p. 47). It thus appears that, to these artists, to be 'seen' is to be recognised, to be recognised is to be analysed and to be analysed is to be reduced to information. This information is, in turn, used by states and corporations as the primary tool to gain and maintain power. This power is conceived as an influence over one's decisions and behaviour. Facial recognition technology operated by capitalist and state powers is associated with a form of mediated and remote influence on one's behaviour.[[4]](#footnote-4) This technologically mediated influence is considered a form of direct interference in and infiltration into the core of what makes for a person: independent ownership of its decisions and behaviour, which have to be guarded and protected from this kind of meddling. It seems as if facial recognition technology operated by states and corporations is associated with having access to Kierkegaard's emigrant who hides in one's soul. These fears of "decision-intrusion" (Acland 2012), of being influenced in one's decision-making by outside forces that operate according to their own, and seemingly opposed, interests, suggests the susceptibility of the mind and its dwindling agency in the face of algorithmic capture of the face. This view is not far ahead of positions on algorithms selves discussed in chapter 1.

Described in the above are anxieties about the effects of algorithmic biopolitics, or the disciplinary governing of people by way of an algorithmic logic of cost-reduction, calculations, measurements, comparison, and evaluation, which is indicative of a particular understanding of the self and a specific understanding of facial recognition algorithms. It is feared that employed in a certain way, the alleged power of algorithms may nudge people into amiable, docile tools for those in whose interests recognition technology systems operate. The biopower ascribed to facial recognition systems flows from its collecting and using of information to which the captured face gives access. The form of biopower that information collection exerts is imagined in different ways. Blas fears an algorithmic culture in which LGBTI+ minority groups are targeted, excluded, and treated with indifference. Harvey fears being itemised, listed, and valued only in relation to the data that can be extracted and collected from his walks of life in the interests of profit or power for others. Crispin's fears the loss of authority, being ineffectual and being objectified by another organism that has no concern for who he is. He argues that these networked systems "see human beings as abstract things, patterns, and numbers, not as individual people whose lives matter" (Crispin 2014).

Algorithmic anxiety in relation to facial recognition technology shares characteristics with dystopian technological narratives. Wendy Chun observes:

[P]aranoid narratives of Big Brother's all-seeing and all-archiving eye are similarly agoraphobic. They too mark as ideal noninvasive, happy spaces … The info-paranoid respond to the current 'public' infrastructure …by creating private (that is, secret) spaces or cloaks, within which they hope to be invisible (Chun, 2006, p. 255).

These artists seem to suggest that to safeguard the self from the all-seeing and all-archiving eye of algorithmic culture, what is needed is to thwart facial recognition technology. Indeed, such an imagination, as Hans Harbers argues in another context, echoes "the endemic Romantic narrative of despair of being overrun by a technological juggernaut, which is guided only by instrumental values…" (Harbers 2005, p. 12). However, looking at these works through a Kierkegaardian lens, a different narrative emerges. It could be argued the despair of the artists lacks possibility, or that it lacks a sense of the infinite. A person who grounds itself in finitude, Kierkegaard explains, is overwhelmed by a daunting sense of constriction and limitation. He writes, "the determinist, the fatalist, is in despair ... because for him everything has become necessity" (SUD p. 40). A balance needs to be found between a grounding in necessity and in the desire for self-transcendence, in possibility. Moreover, the imagination is what leads a person out into the infinite (SUD p. 31). Algorithmic anxiety is about the position of the self towards the radical openness and unknowability of the future and towards the regimes that attempt to close in on, narrow, and delineate that future, which raises the question: How can we strike a different balance between necessity and possibility?

## A Relational Choreography of Selves

What is at stake for these artists? Or rather, where lies their despair? What does their despair lack? For Crispin and Harvey, algorithmic identification technologies provide an entry point to corrupt and inhibit what is considered to be a private and independent self, a self that by way of these technologies risks to become objectified as a means to unknown ends. Identity, understood as that part of the self where autonomy and independence reside, is at stake to facial recognition systems, Crispin and Harvey fear. Blas aims to provide "informatic invisibility" that aims to "open pathways to self-determination and autonomy" as "a means of resistance against the state and its identity politics" (Blas, 2016, 46-47). To resist the identity politics of the state is to defy its social normalising techniques for indexing, regulating and managing human behaviour that is "predetermined by a multifarious conglomerate of corporate, military, and state interests" (Blas, 2016, p. 45). Such a politics of rubrics and disembodiment, Blas states, "always enact a politics of reduction and exclusion" and "annihilates opacity" (Blas, 2016, p. 48).

Despair, Kierkegaard teaches us, is about lack and lack is about desire. As much as these projects are about thwarting facial recognition technology, they too allude to the desire of being included, valued, and acknowledged—in short, a longing to be recognised and seen by others. Algorithmic anxiety about the self is about the thin line between, the desire to be noticed, to be seen, and the fear to be exposed, judged, or to fall short. To be seen, as Audrey Lorde explains in a different context, ‘is always fraught with danger… of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live’ (Lorde, 1984, p. 42). Lorde emphasises the inherent vulnerability of the relational self. Rather than an autonomous, independent, powerful individual, the self in relation to algorithmic culture is experienced as relational, dependent, vulnerable, malleable—at risk.

Considering these projects in more detail, tacitly but poignantly, brings complex connections between software, self and environment to the surface. These are connections that in a way, could be productively understood to *remind* liberal subjects, produced under conditions of the disavowal of their entangled being, of their relationality *and* what they desire and lack. Through the play with masks and the dissolving of self and environment, connections are made that mobilise a critical perception of human and machine relations, opening up an artistic space which challenges dominant understandings of a self and allows for a different way of relating to algorithmic culture. Masks and camouflage, as I argued above, always already presuppose entanglement. Therefore, as Ingold notes, "the mask is not a disguise intended to hide the identity of the bearer" (Ingold 2000, p. 123). Rather, practices of masking and camouflage intervene in the way the self becomes visible in relation to the self, others, and to its environment in the first place. To avoid being captured by recognition algorithms, camouflage provides a way to vanish in the background to non-identity. In the triad between self, environment and medium of capture, the self merges with its environment to the effect that it cannot be captured.

The pattern design of *HyperFace* performs this triad on the fabric it is printed on. The pattern keeps the face of its wearer unrecognisable by way of modifying the immediate surroundings of the wearer's face. The print designs flood or overwhelm recognition systems with false positives, with false faces. Harvey's *HyperFace* could be considered as a form of "depersonalization by assimilation to space", as we noted above, and as a way as to vanish in the crowd. Today, it has become increasingly difficult to hide within the crowd: cityscapes are dotted with state and corporate "gazes" in the form of CCTV and security cameras, recognition technologies, sensors, and monitors that assume constant observation and identification in public space. *HyperFace* provides its wearer with the condition of possibility to become a crowd. By sauntering in the city wearing *HyperFace* textiles, it could be argued Harvey "overturns the principle of being a citizen into a being hiding from itself and losing himself in the crowd" (Isin, 2002, p. 224). Or in the words of Brecht: "Man does not become man again by stepping forth from the masses but by sinking deeper into them," (quoted in Jonsson, 2013, p. 160). For Brecht, an individual belongs to several collectives and is therefore divisible. This Brechtian divisibility is made explicit in the work of Harvey. The individual wearer of Harvey's *HyperFace* couture presents itself to recognition technologies as a crowd, representing an individual as a multitude. We are in constantly changing situations in our lives, Kierkegaard argues, but what does not change is the possibility to relate to the possible in every situation instead of organising one's life around a set of preconceived ideas, even when that situation is limited, and room to manoeuvre seems nil.

Let us turn to Blas's *Facial Weaponisation* series. The aim of Blas's masks is to provide "opacity," a concept he derived from the poet Édouard Glissant (Blas 2014). Glissant famously asserted "the right to opacity" (2010, p. 189). Here, opacity stands in contradistinction to the West's "old obsession" with "discovering what lies at the bottom of natures" and its "requirement for transparency" (Glissant, p. 190). Glissant contends that "opaqueness is to be opposed to any pseudo-humanist attempt to reduce us to the scale of some universal value, to any imposition of universal models on singularities" (Glissant, p. 191). Blas associates the "recognising" that algorithmic facial recognition systems do with imposed transparency. With his series of masks, Blas addresses who is made "informatically visible", pointing to the uneven rights and advantages enjoyed by some and lacked by minority groups in society. Some faces cannot disappear in a crowd; some faces are more vulnerable than others; some faces are feared, criminalised, and instrumentalised before they are recognised by algorithms. With this series, he attempts to "weaponise" against imposed transparency by offering the possibility to equip the face with a way of opting out and escaping from the logic of the visible.

Blas's face masks represent the desire to "let exist as such that which is immeasurable, unidentifiable nonidentifiable, and unintelligible in things" (Blas, 2016, p. 48). This *laissez exister* is imagined as a possibility which is possible only in safe spaces that are free from intrusive technologies of informatic visibility, or what he calls "autonomous free-zones": protected and closed-off areas. The "ideal of peace and quiet" is here produced by engaging masks as a weapon in combat against an imagined and externalised influencing machine (Colomina, 1991, p. 7). However, it is by virtue of this "free zone" between human and technological environment that the synthesis between the two is foregrounded. The possibility of individual alterity and singularity—externalised and imagined as a form of negative liberty—appears to stand in direct relation to, even depends on and is tied to, face capturing technologies of imagined capitalist and state-sanctioned standardisation and universalisation. Any sense of autonomy is here due to others, to the network of people and technologies we are part of and their dependencies. Kierkegaard argued that people tend to identify themselves with preconceived ideas about the self and others. He points to the dangers that lure when one identifies the self with the idea of the self. The prisons of the mind have been built by "what we think we know and what we think we are" and these prisons form an obstacle to freedom and possibility. Blas's despair lacks infinity; the relationship to infinity has to be repeated in the finite—by movement on the spot.

The problem of identifying the self with an ideal type of self is addressed by Kierkegaard in *SUD.* The self is not a substance, not a container of identity, Kierkegaard warns. He illustrates his point with a story of a young man who lived by the slogan "either Caesar or nothing". When the young man doesn't become Caesar, he is in deep despair. Kierkegaard explains that the boy is not in despair over the fact that he did not become Caesar. He is in despair over an idea he has over the self. He despairs himself understood as *not*-Caesar. Had he not identified himself with this idea of the self—the self as Caesar—there would be room for other ways to relate to the self. In other words, the young man lacked necessity. In a similar vein, it could be argued Crispin's *Data-Masks* are not about despair over an encroaching Technological Other overriding humanity. Rather, he is in despair over a certain idea he has of humanity in relation to large abstractions conceived as not-Humanity, or outside of humanity. If he did not have this idea—of humanity as severed from technological others—there would be other ways to relate to the dissemination of Technological Others aside from black-boxing the self. In a different reading, his *Data-Masks* could be read as ways to 'actualise' the virtual. His "deities", as Crispin calls them, represent the (pan)optical logic as a belief in ghosts. The "belief" in recognition technology and the data it spits out might very well turn out to be the ghost of the twenty-first century. His *Data-Masks* conceal by way of mirroring; his masks reflect back and "hold a mirror up to the all-seeing eye of the digital-panopticon" (Crispin 2013). Invisibility understood as unrecognisability is here achieved by way of swapping one's real face with a model. What is reflected in the mirror Crispin holds up to identity recognition technology is not Reality, but the Model. Identity recognition technology is represented as a dog chasing its own tail.

These different takes on facial recognition technology cast doubt on the indexical relation between face capture and the self. Read along the lines of Kierkegaard's conception of despair; they point to the burden of identifying with and having fixed ideas about the self. In other words, they point to the burden of despair as an imbalance or mis-relation in the makeup of the self. In a Kierkegaardian sense, masks and camouflage provide a space for a relational play with the self between seeing and knowing and between knowledge and power; that space, however, is not a vacuum, neither a free-zone, but a synthesis of possibility and necessity. If the task is to think and do necessity and possibility together, camouflage and masks design help to orient and heed one's behaviour towards possibility within a finite world. In Kierkegaardian sense, these masks and camouflage projects could be considered as a move towards possibility.

## Faces of Possibility

The images we have of facial recognition algorithms and of our relation to them show the importance of how we think of the self in relation to broader abstractions. How we imagine the future of algorithmic culture gives us an idea of how we think of the self. In "Subject Without a Face", Marcus Steinweg suggests:

We need to learn to do without identity. We need to muster the courage to exist with more than merely a thousand faces; by comprehending that science is not everything. Life does not close in on itself. The circle is broken (Steinweg 2010).

Instead of understanding the face as a gate-way to identity and identity as something that we "are", "have", "posses", or "own", Steinweg argues that we need to:

[U]nderstand the self as a scene of continual self-exceedence… The play with masks, the dance of faces that dissolve into and replace each other, it is the movement of life in its opening up to other subjects. The face mediated between the Other and me. An excessive variety of possibilities. (Steinweg 2010).

Steinweg proposes an alternative understanding of identity; however, one that lacks grounding in necessity. The self is not an object for one's eyes, neither an excessive or fluid variety of limitless possibilities. It is not merely contingent and inconsistent; it is also defined, described, and limited. A relational understanding of the self allows for an understanding of the self neither as a being nor as some fixed substance. A relational understanding of the self asks not what the self is, but how it comes to be and what it can do in different contexts and settings.

Masks and camouflage may be understood as subverting the "tyranny" of a normative understanding of the self (Pearl, 2018, p. 160). They offer a subversive play with relations between the public manifestation of the self, the viewing of the self by the self and by an assumed (algorithmic) Other—including the power relations in that space—and a relation to the possible. Each individual self also affects the collective. Power relations are key here. Although never absolute, the possibilities of some faces seem limitless while those of others are strictly limited. As Deleuze and Guattari argued, the face of power absorbs all real faces and rejects the ones which it cannot assimilate, ordering them by degrees of difference from the pure, ideal template of the face of Christ in Western culture. As such, the face is not neutral, nor is it the representation of the average white man; rather, it is the white man himself (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 176). In this context, it includes the white woman, too. One does not exist in a vacuum but in entanglement with others. Taken together, Harvey's strategy of the collectivisation of the individual, Blas's facial weaponry which operate as a demonstration of entanglement with facial recognition technologies, and Crispin's ghost-busting all de-emphasise the individual symbolised by the face including the assumptions of origin and instead foreground individuation and our relational entanglement and alignment with others, our environment, and with that which established and transcends the self and its environment. Through these works, the self appears as a dynamic relation in the synthesis between the virtual and the actual, the social and the material, possibility and necessity.

Seen this way, the desire to isolate the self, for singularity and insularity, and to be sealed off from one's surroundings is co-constituted and inseparable from dependency and existential uncertainty, it is inseparable from the desire to belong and be recognised. To state it another way, algorithmic anxiety is a lack of balance between a desire for autonomy, singularity and controlled isolation, and a longing for a sense of belonging and existential certainty, or to immerse oneself in a collective. It is the experience of entanglement and the simultaneous experience of limited control over one's future position in relation to algorithmic culture that triggers anxiety and the desire for a closed-off space, a safe haven, a demarcated line between "inside" and "outside". Algorithmic anxiety triggers the desire for "an island unto himself; a place where he controls his own world—a world of … security, safety and privacy" (Colomina, 1991, p. 7).

However, emphasising one side of the synthesis over the other, emphasising autonomy, independence and privacy, gives room to algorithmic anxiety to rise like a wall. Facial recognition anxiety is partly about stressing one's self as an individual, separate, and therefore vulnerable entity. A relational understanding brings to the fore that the self is not something one "has" or "possesses", nor the sum of its rational decisions. Subjectivity takes place in a larger whole of relations, immanent and transcendent. And by extension, the self is not something that can be captured by facial recognition technologies. The self is a relation of that which establishes relations of self-relating, over which we and others have no control, but that affect us nonetheless. The Kierkegaardian task is to think and actualise together the contrasting elements around which the self coheres. Each individual is tasked with a balancing act between these opposites, a continual striving that is subject to constant change. The desire to overpower facial recognition often conceals the desire to overpower the self. It often masks the desire to be in possession of oneself and overemphasises the relation of the self towards facial recognition technologies.

Any attempt to ostracise, deny or attempt to "plug" one side of the opposites that co-constitute the self is bound to end up in despair. In fact, it is a lack of contingency, randomness, disorder, and blurred borders that induces despair. Kierkegaard's subject is situated, aware of its finitude and limited perspective, aware of its task to constantly manoeuvre between the opposites that constitute the self, and aware of the dangers both of uncritically situating itself complacently in a normative society *and* of speaking above it, of assuming autonomy and of avoiding responsibility. It is precisely indeterminacy and uncertainty that allows for possibility, because that what is ungraspable cannot be grasped or captured or quantified; nevertheless, we stand in relation to it.

Designed to symbolise protection against and a critique of the perceived intrusion, policing, and controlling powers of recognition technology, masks and camouflage wear could be considered as offering an interventionist play with the desire for a controlled environment, a transparent space where the individual is in possession of itself and has the final authority in the situations it is in in a context where individuals are always already embedded and entangled in relations with their socio-technical environment. What masks and camouflage wear offer are an intervention in the form of a kind of re-balancing between practices that circumscribe, pin down, enclose, and encircle the self and those that move, open up, change and make fluid. They are about offering possibilities to rebalance and struggle through the experience of anxiety invoked by the vulnerability of "being seen", when this is understood as being seen for what you think you are, a self within the self or the idea one has of the self, *and* by the notion of the self as the scene of limitless self-exceeding. The ember of algorithmic anxiety is stoked when we latch on to the idea that the individual is "the creator of its own fortune, yes, the creator of itself" (E/O, p. 393). Such dwelling in finitude is what causes the self to be in despair, according to Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard saw the most significant threat and Achilles' heel in a society of individuals which has lost the awareness of the limits of the mind, in a society that declared the unknown dead and put reason on its throne. Instead of assuming the underside of a dualism, instead of defending the modernist abstraction of the Autonomous Subject, camouflage and masking gesture to relations of mutual dependence, embeddedness, situatedness, and entanglement. It is these inherent contradictions and instability that gives way to possibility, of relating otherwise, and of the multiplication of relations. The mask of anonymity was traditionally used as a criticism of the self or in order to liberate itself from the idea of the self. However, as Kierkegaard reminds us, the self exceeds *the idea* of the self. It is by de-emphasising autonomy, identity, independence and transparency—and in extension assumptions of originality—that possibilities of relationality, collectivity, and collective belonging come into view that could multiply avenues to work through algorithmic anxiety. The full potential of the mask as a relational play between self and environment would allow moving beyond hypostasising conceptions of self and technological others towards a "stylised repetition of acts" (Butler, 1999, p. 197). Repetition, as Kierkegaard conceives it, ‘is an indestructible garment that fits closely and tenderly, neither binds nor sags […] But whoever fails to comprehend that life is a repetition, and that this constitutes its beauty, condemns himself’ (*Repetition*, 1983, p. 132).

Masks and camouflage may free us from algorithmic anxiety conditioned by living one-sidedly as they allow for the positing of the self as a synthesis in relation, offering a diffusion of subjectivity that opens up ways of being, belonging, and aligning in algorithmic culture that is not wedded to human-machine dualism, to the autonomous subject, or to the uncritical acceptance of the logic of algorithmic regimes of visibility. An opening to the possible arises from the realisation that one way to overcome facial recognition anxiety is to merge with others and to lose the dearly held notion of the individual.

This chapter discussed artistic strategies of invisibility viz-a-viz facial recognition technology. The next chapter discusses the popular artistic imaginary of representing trading algorithms as an invisible black box and the algorithmic anxieties and concomitant artistic responses this evokes. It then moves to the spectral portrayals of trading algorithms exemplified by Emma Charles's experimental video artwork, *Fragments on Machines* (2013), and Femke Herregraven's, *Pull everything, pull everything* (2018). In different ways, Charles and Herregraven focus on the entanglement of the material and the immaterial and of past and present in their engagements with trading algorithms. Doing so, they draw attention to the larger systemic context of risk exploitation and financialisation in which trading algorithms are embedded and point to possible and unconventional interventions.

1. This chapter is lightly revised from de Vries, P., & Schinkel, W. (2019). Algorithmic anxiety: Masks and camouflage in artistic imaginaries of facial recognition algorithms. *Big Data & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951719851532> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Such as the hackers collective Anonymous, and the work of artists such as Mark Shepherd, Martin Backes, Kiri Dalena, Peter Weibel, and Ingrid Burrington, to name but a few. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The face has been discussed thoroughly in philosophy, a history that I will not repeat here. Suffice to say perspectives vary greatly, ranging from the face understood as a repository of one’s essence to an ever-changing infinite possibility. As central to the encounter with the other, the face has been granted a key role in ethics, most famously in the work of Emmanuel Levinas who, like Goffman, considers the face not as a part of the body nor even as mere physical appearance, but rather as “the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*” (Levinas 1969, p 50, italics in original). Judith Butler has called attention to the politics of what she calls radical effacement, whereby certain people never appear in a normative or political register because they have been effectively effaced either through occlusion or through representation, which means that their suffering and death therefore become ungrieveable (Butler 2004). And Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that the face, in its normative understanding, is a codified and rigid landscape of power whose meaning and subject does not depend on the singular faciality traits co-opted by it. The face is the constant effort to over-code the uncodeable. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 186). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The notion of dwindling agency as an effect of subliminal techniques used by mass media is a well-known trope in media and communication history (e.g. Acland 2012). The myth of an influencing machine, drug or technique perfected to implant and remove ideas and feelings operated by enemies as instruments of mind-control is a staple in histories of the Cold War, and specifically in the infamous history of the C.I.A's late 1940s and early 1950s mind-control program MK ULTRA (e.g. Acland 2012, Turner 2004, Kinzer 2019). The fear of being watched and judged when one assumes no one is watching is also a recurring theme in American blockbuster movies. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)